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FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9916

INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHSH/AMEMBASSY BERN PRIORITY 7826

RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 0213

RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 0001

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RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 9101

RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0004

RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 0135

RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY

RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0015

C O N F I D E N T I A L BRUSSELS 000064

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/WE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/19/2020

TAGS: PHUM PREL SOCI CU BE

SUBJECT: BELGIUM: ENGAGEMENT WITH CIVIL SOCIETY IN CUBA
THROUGH DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

REF: STATE 131637

Classified By: Acting Pol/Econ Counselor Robert Kiene for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Cuba desk officer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Sadi Brancart, said that Belgian-Cuba relations are "better than the EU average," thanks to significant development assistance. He was unaware of Spain's initiative to replace the EU common position with individual bilateral agreements, but believed that because of its strongly pro-EU views, Belgium would oppose this out of principle. Belgium would welcome greater coordination with the USG on the "Cuban Five" and the trade embargo, to stop allowing the GOC to use these subjects as an excuse for inaction on reform. The GOB strives to maintain an on-going dialogue within Cuba by striking a balance between criticism of the GOC's human rights record and development assistance.
END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) Poloff met to deliver reftel points to Sadi Brancart, Cuba Desk Officer at the Belgian MFA, on January 19. Brancart said that Belgian-Cuba relations are "better than the EU average," principally because of the amount of development assistance given to Cuba by Belgium. In 2008, this assistance amounted to 4.1 million Euros, nearly double the 2007 amount and 0.25 percent of Belgium's global assistance budget. About half of the assistance goes toward education and health programs, as these benefit the general Cuban population and cannot easily be diverted by the GOC. Most of the assistance is distributed by cooperating non-governmental organizations and civil society.

¶3. (C) Brancart said that the Belgian MFA welcomes Spain's initiative to discuss the common EU position on Cuba, as the position was formed "a long time ago in 1996." However, he was unaware of the movement to replace the EU common position with individual bilateral ones, and said that because Belgium is pro-EU, he believes that it would oppose this out of principle.

¶4. (C) Brancart stated the two issues on which the U.S. could coordinate more closely with Belgium are the "Cuban Five" and the ongoing U.S. trade embargo to Cuba. He said that Cuba has become adept at using these issues as a justification for inaction on a range of proposed reforms and social issues.

¶5. (C) Brancart said that Belgium deals with a number of

civil society NGO's in Cuba, predominantly in the development arena. Belgium has an Embassy in Havana, making outreach activities on-going. Brancart said that the Belgian Embassy does not provide access to information to Cuban citizens. He described how the Embassy in Havana holds two Belgian national day events to build contacts, one for the government and one for the government's political opponents. Both events are attended by the whole Embassy, including the Ambassador. He concluded that Belgian diplomats try to strike a balance when criticizing the GOC, avoiding doing so too aggressively, as this once led to having relations with GOC frozen and making it impossible to perform development work.

GUTMAN

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